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UDK 93

GRAVESTONES AND THE HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL TATAR CIVILIZATION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

НАДГРОБНЫЕ КАМНИ И ИСТОРИЯ СРЕДНЕВЕКОВОЙ ТАТАРСКОЙ ЦИВИЛИЗАЦИИ: КРАТКИЙ ОБЗОР

Аннотация. Данная статья представляет собой некий обзор и краткую характеристику истории татарских надгробий, предлагаемой К. Мухаметшиным. В статье контекстуализирована информация, представленная ранее упомянутым ученым, посредством обращений к междисциплинарным исследованиям истории периода Черной смерти (чумы) 14-го века, для обсуждения временных границ конца первого периода надписей и выяснения, как это помогает понять эволюцию надгробий в последующие века. В статье также рассматриваются дополнительные факторы языка, экономики, религии и истории искусства, тем самым предлагая исследователям дополнительные ракурсы для изучения этих надгробий.

Ключевые слова: черная смерть (чума), надгробия, надписи, Волжская Булгария, Золотая Орда, Казанское ханство, татары.

Abstract. This article takes as a starting point the concise information offered by C. Muxametšin concerning the history of Tatar gravestones. The article contextualizes the information given by this scholar by drawing upon interdisciplinary research on the history of the Black Death in the 14th century to discuss the end of the first period of the inscriptions and how it helps us understand the evolution of gravestones in later centuries. It also considers additional factors in language, economy, religion, and art history to suggest additional ways in which these gravestones can be studied.

Keywords: Black Death, gravestones, inscriptions, Volga Bulgaria, Golden Horde, Khanate of Kazan, Tatars.

Introduction

One of the most important sources for the study of the Islamic civilization of the ancestors of the Kazan Tatars in the medieval period is the gravestones of Muslims from the Middle Volga region. There is an important body of scholarship in Turkology devoted to the language and other features of these monuments. I have in mind the works of Soviet scholars such as G.V. Yusupov [18], contemporary scholars such as Färid Xakimcanov and Cämil Muxametšin [3, 4, 5], and foreign scholars such as András RónaTas [8], Talat Tekin [17], Marcel Erdal [1], and others. Most recently, Cämil Muxametšin was interviewed by the Tatar Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in an article (in Tatar language) entitled “No Gravestone Was Placed in a Time of Crisis” [9]. In this article Muxametšin, who is director of the State HistoricalArchitectural Site at Bolgar, offers a summary of his views concerning the history and features of the gravestones found in the Middle Volga region beginning in the 13th century. In this interview he offers concise figures for the number of such gravestones, how they changed over time, and other insights regarding the production of these gravestones. In this article I would like to paraphrase Muxametšin’s important comments for an English-language audience, since they deserve to be better known. I will also offer my own comments in agreement with some points, in disagreement with some other points, as well as offer additional contextualization for the phenomena which he is describing based upon my own research on the history of the Middle Volga region.

1. Periodization of the Gravestones

According to Cämil Muxametšin, more than 3,000 Tatar gravestones have been found in various parts of Russia. With regard to their number over time, more than 400 of them belong to the 13th14th centuries. There are approximately 300 gravestones preserved from the 15th16th centuries. The number of gravestones placed in the 16th17th centuries does not exceed 50. The remaining 2250 gravestones belong to the 18th century and later. Gravestones from the 13th14th centuries (the period of the Golden Horde) and the 15th16th centuries (period of the Khanate of Kazan) are to be found only in Tatarstan. Outside of Tatarstan, there is the mausoleum of Xösäyen bay in the Çişmä rayon in Bashqortostan which has three gravestones from the 13th14th centuries. In Chuvashia there are also a couple of stones from this period. Otherwise, according to Muxametšin, all the remaining stones are located in the territory of Tatarstan.

What is my reaction to this account of the history of Tatar gravestones offered by Muxametšin? I would agree

first of all that we are dealing with four distinct periods:

1. The 13th14th centuries is the period in which the largest number of gravestones have been produced in the medieval period.

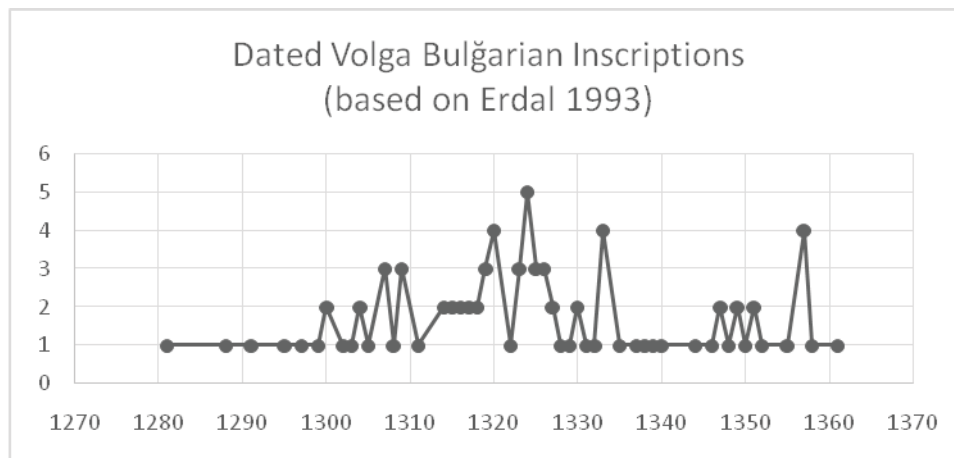
2. The 15th16th centuries is the period of the Khanate of Kazan (1430s1552), whose center, Kazan, was located approximately 100 km north of the town of Bulğar. Fewer gravestones were produced than during the period of the Golden Horde.

3. The 16th17th centuries (presumably 1552 on) has the smallest number of gravestones associated with it. It corresponds to the period following the conquest of the Khanate of Kazan, which is truly a dark period in the history of the Tatar people for several reasons (see below).

4. The 18th century and later is the modern period coinciding with the largest number of gravestones.

How can one explain the historical processes underlying this periodization? I would argue that there are several important factors which need to be considered. During the first period of the 13th14th centuries Volga Bulğaria was an important town in the Golden Horde (1230s1360, see below), continuing an existence which began at the beginning of the 10th century. Indeed, we should consider this the time of the greatest flourishing of the town of Bulğar as a commercial center because of the fur trade and other commodities. (As we will see below, one of the gravestones of the 14th century even identifies the person it is honoring as a goldsmith.) This is, after all, the period of the great architectural monuments of Bulğar.

We also need to consider, however, that there was a sharp break beginning around 1360, since as I have argued elsewhere, this is the period in which we see the collapse of political unity in the Golden Horde following the death of Berdibek Khan (r. 13571359). The reason for this is the epidemic of bubonic plague known as the “Black Death”, which we now know originated in the QinghaiTibet Plateau, reached Lake Isıqköl in 13381339 [14]. It had ravaged many urban centers in the Golden Horde by the time it reached Kaffa in the Crimea in 1346 [15, 12, 10]. As I have argued elsewhere, we see a sharp rise in the number of Nestorian Turkic gravestones in 13381339 and again in 1341. Similarly, I have argued that the spike in the number of gravestones in the 1350s, followed by the end of gravestones with inscriptions in the Volga Bulğarian language, is a consequence of the Black Death [13, 11]. This can be seen in my first, imperfect attempt at graphing the number of inscriptions across time (1281/21361?).¹⁴ As far as I am concerned, the last datable inscription in the Volga Bulğarian language is from 1358. I would argue that the Golden Horde collapsed after 1359, so circa 1360 (not 1380, 1395, or 1480) is the real end of the Golden Horde, leading to demographic and political collapse, plus many other consequences.



Beginning in the 1430s we see a gradual rebound in the population of the territories of the former Golden Horde, with the establishment of a series of new khanates in Kazan, Kasimov, the Crimea, Astrakhan, etc. There was a strong decline in the number of Volga Bulğarian, perhaps it died off completely. Instead, we see a new phase in the immigration of speakers of Kipchak Turkic dialects (see below) [16].

The period following the conquest of the Khanate of Kazan was truly a tragedy for the Tatars of the time. I would agree with Muxametšin about the death and displacement of population, the forced Christianization, and the degradation of Islamic civilization in the Middle Volga region. Another factor to consider is the Little Ice Age, which no doubt had a negative impact on the agricultural population of the Middle Volga region as well, possibly including further demographic decline and impoverishment. The great increase in the number of gravestones beginning in the 18th century may reflect the increasing reIslamization of the Middle Volga region as a consequence of the inroads of Naqshbandi Sufi missionary activity coupled with a demographic recovery. Increased trade with Central Asia and the end of the Little Ice Age would also have contributed to an economic recovery for the population. After all, as we will

¹⁴ This is based on the dates given in the table in [1, p. 2528]. I have not had a chance for the purposes of this paper to verify the dates independently.

see below, gravestones are expensive.

2. Languages of the Gravestones

In the words of Cämil Muxametšin, one gravestone found in Bolgar has a very interesting text which anyone who knows Tatar and can read the Arabic alphabet can read with ease. This gravestone [dating from 1317], now housed in the Museum of Bulġarian Civilization, has an inscription which reads [18, #15; 3, #5]:

Егетләр күрке, күнелләр үзәге, галимнәрне агырлаган, ятим, тол, үксезләрне асраган Муса углы алтынчы Шаһидулла зираты торыр. Рабигыльәүвәлнең уртасында тарихка 717.

“This is the grave of goldsmith Şahidulla, son of Musa, the handsomest of men, the heart of good humor, one who has hosted scholars, one who has taken care of orphans, widows, and the helpless. In the middle of Rabīʿ alawwal 717.”¹⁵

According to Muxametšin, the language of this inscription is no different from the modern Tatar. He notes that only the word *agırlagan*, meaning ‘to respect’ (*olılgan*), has fallen out of usage. He notes that other monuments similar to this are excellent sources for studying the Tatar language.

Muxametšin continues that gravestones belonging to the period of the Khanate of Kazan can also be read with ease, for example:

Дөнья гел болай тормас, гел үзгәрештән торыр, чөнки Аллаһтан башка карар юк.

“The world will not always be like this, it is always changing, because there is no decision other than from Allah”.

According to Muxametšin, this inscription is found on a gravestone used in the construction of the Blagoveshchenie Cathedral in the Kazan Kremlin.

What is my reaction to this account of the discussion of the language of these gravestones offered by Muxametšin? In my view, this interview does not give a full picture of the linguistic features of these inscriptions. While I agree that some of the inscriptions from the 13th14th centuries are written in a Standard Turkic language (and some inscriptions are in Arabic), the vast majority of them are in Volga Bulġarian, a language which is closely related to modern Chuvash (though not the direct ancestor of Chuvash) [6, p. 13123; 7]. Following the depopulation of the Middle Volga region, the influx of speakers of Kipchak Turkic speakers (including many nomadic groups such as the Noġays) meant that the Middle Volga region around the confluence of the Volga and Kama Rivers would henceforth be almost exclusively the domain of Kipchak Turkic speakers, such that Tatarstan is almost exclusively Kipchak Turkic today. (It is true that there are some speakers of Chuvash and FinnoUgric languages in Tatarstan.) The distribution of speakers of a Western (or Bulġartype) Turkic language would henceforth be limited mostly to the area inhabited today by speakers of Chuvash.

3. Economy of Gravestones

According to Cämil Muxametšin, stone carvers generally dug up stones which had been lying underground for centuries along the banks of rivers. Since they had been lying there under humid conditions, working them was easy. Stone carvers made them into the necessary shape, smoothed them, added inscriptions, and dried them in the sun. Muxametšin cites historian Nurulla Garif, according to whom the price of one stone was the equivalent of one flock of animals. Sometimes they gave five cows or two horses for a gravestone. In short, stone carvers did not live badly, but their job was not the easiest. A stone could weigh up to one ton. You needed to dig it out of the earth, bring it from the riverbank to your workplace, and then work it. Moreover, because the price of stone was high and the services of the craftsman was expensive, not everyone could afford it. Usually they placed a gravestone for a *bek*, *mirza*, *sultan*, or a *sayyid*. Wealthy persons with money also had a gravestone placed.

Later in the interview Muxametšin also says that if we pay attention, the highest number of gravestones corresponds to the second half of the 13th—first half of the 14th century. The period with the second highest number of gravestones in the period of the Khanate of Kazan. In other words after the destruction of the Golden Horde and the Khanate of Kazan Tatars were not placing gravestones, because both the state and society were experiencing a deep crisis: at that time they buried the dead as best as they could. He emphasized again that the number of gravestones placed in the 16th17th centuries does not exceed 50, but after the nation began to form itself once again, after the building of mosques was permitted, gravestones make their return and the tradition flourishes once again.

I agree completely with Muxametšin that the carving of gravestones was a profession requiring a highly-skilled stone carver and that the handiwork of such a skilled artisan would be prohibitively expensive for most people. We know that the successive waves of bubonic plague would have taken the lives of workers in all professions; skilled stone carvers were not exempt. In general, we know from medieval Europe that the Black Death created a crisis of labor. There were fewer skilled workers, there were not enough individuals to perform all the tasks required, and as a result there was a sharp rise in wages, resulting in inflation [2, p. 40 ff.]. The fact that the last datable inscription in Volga Bulġarian is 1358 (or possibly 1361, according to Erdal [1, p. 27]) suggests that the people who knew that language, or the scholars or clergy who could write the texts for the gravestones on which these inscriptions were written, or perhaps the stone carvers who would physically carve the stone grave markers were no longer in adequate supply, or perhaps their services became too expensive.

15 The month of Rabīʿ alawwal in the year 717 A.H. corresponds to Friday 13 May 1317 C.E-Friday 10 June 1317 C.E.

4. Inscriptions of the Gravestones

According to Cämil Muxametšin, as a rule the inscription on the gravestone would begin with a *sūra*. After that would be a text in Tatar, for example:

Дөнья – үләксәдер, ә аның артыннан куучы – эттер.

“The world is a corpse, and the one who chases after it is a dog.”

After this there would be some information about the person resting there. First of all would be given his father's name, sometimes his grandfather's name, then an indication of the deceased's social standing (*bek*, *mirza*, or *sayyid*), then finally the date the gravestone was placed. Sometimes it is possible to find along the edge of the gravestone or on the back some information about the person who carved the stone, too. In the first half of the 17th century such gravestones are to be found only around Layış, but in the 18th-19th centuries the author of the inscription is indicated on most stones. In many cases the author of the inscription was the *mulla* of the village.

In my view, there is a lot more which can still be said about the inscriptions than is contained in this interview with Muxametšin. First of all, Muxametšin is right to stress that there is interesting information contained in these inscriptions. It is worth exploring the names in the inscriptions from the 13th-14th centuries from the perspective of the history of the Golden Horde. There is, however, a point on which I disagree with Muxametšin. The most common phrase with which the gravestones open is the Arabic phrase: *huwa alḥayyu alladhī lā yamūtu* ‘He is eternal and does not die’. This is not, however, a verse from a *sūra* in the Qur’ān. It is beyond the scope of this paper to identify the origin of the phrase, but it seems to be associated with Sufi devotional prayers in our own day. The use of this phrase continues well into later centuries, but as far as I know it eventually falls out of usage. In contrast, one phrase which is widely used by Tatars in the modern period is the Arabic phrase: *innā liLāhī wainnā ilayhi rāci’ūna* ‘Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return.’ This phrase is indeed from *Sūrat alBaqara* in the Qur’ān (2:156). Much more research still needs to be conducted on the Arabic phrases used in these inscriptions and what the geographic origins and the religious context of these medieval inscriptions might be. It would also be of interest to know what influences can be discerned on the inscriptions of the period of the Khanate of Kazan as well as the later inscriptions of the 16th-17th centuries and the large corpus of inscriptions from the 18th century on.

5. Style of the Gravestones

According to Cämil Muxametšin, there were ornaments along the sides and on the rear of gravestones placed around Bolgar in the 13th-14th centuries. Such gravestones were rectangular, with a thickness of 18-20 cm, a width of 55-60 cm, and a height of 1.5 meter. The style changes during the period of the Khanate of Kazan. The top of the gravestone begins to be made with a point and the decorations along the sides disappear. But in 1520 the ornaments make a comeback, when clusters of grapes begin to be used to decorate the gravestones. In the 18th-19th centuries around Orenburg there are many interesting shapes which come into existence: there are pillars 1.5 meter high with a checker pattern 40 x 40 cm in size. In Ägerce, for example, they made circular millstones into gravestones. There is a similar phenomenon in Chuvashia: on one such large circular stone they wrote the name of the six persons who funded the village. He continues that in Penza *oblast’*, in the western *rayons* of Ul’yanovsk *oblast’*, around Çüpräle and Kaybiç there are many tamga stones among the gravestones placed there. In other words on that stone is only the tamga of that person. According to Muxametšin, the explanation for this is the weakened state of the religion at that time. He continues that in 1552 the Russians destroyed the entire upper class of the Tatars and forcibly Christianized those who were left alive. As a result the tradition of placing gravestones was also disappearing in Tatar society, which was experiencing sharp transformations during this period.

I would submit that there is a great deal of important cultural information to be gleaned from the style of the gravestones, too. Since I am not an art historian I can only offer limited observations based upon the important observations of Muxametšin. First of all, I would repeat that I believe that there is a great disruption during the period 1360-1430s, so from the end of a unified Golden Horde and the emergence of the Khanate of Kazan. If we look at some of the last dated gravestones with inscriptions in Volga Bulğarian language from 1357-1361, there is the sense that some of them are not as refined or decorated as earlier inscriptions. This is no doubt a result at least in part of the decline in the crafting of gravestones as a result of the Black Death (see above). While some traditions in the style of the gravestones may have continued into the time of the Khanate of Kazan and beyond, it would be reasonable to expect increasing influence from the Ottoman Empire through the Crimean Khanate, too. In this regard the origin of the motif of grape clusters is an example of a topic which merits further research. As noted above, the style of later gravestones may also be influenced by the growing process of the re-Islamization of the Middle Volga region in the 18th century and later. This may also be discernible in part from the style of the ornamentation of the later gravestones.

6. The Present State and Future of Gravestones

Cämil Muxametšin writes that even though gravestones are an extremely important source for the study of Tatar history, there is still no official structure devoted to studying and organizing them. For this reason, often, when the inhabitants of villages organize themselves and restore the cemeteries, they put up the gravestones once again. For example, in the village of Olı Mängär in Täteş rayon and the village of Kotlı Bökäş in Balık Bistäse rayon the local inhabitants restored the cemeteries themselves. But one danger is that while cleaning the stones in order to restore them the uppermost surface can be destroyed, with the result that valuable inscriptions are lost. For this reason one must

be very cautious in restoring the gravestones.

Finally Muxametšin recommends that Tatarstan adopt a special program for the study of gravestones. He considers it advisable to study them, photograph them, publish the inscriptions on them in Tatar and Russian, and publish collections of them. As long as such publications do not exist, he does not believe that one can study them as a scientific source for Tatar history. For now it is only Rāif Märdānov and Irek Hadiev who carry out such work. They were able to conduct research in the Ägerce, Mamadış, and Kukmara *rayons* and publish collective volumes entitled “Tatar Epigraphy” (*Tatar epigrafikası*). According to Muxametšin they were able to do this with the help of the *rayon* heads, it is not possible any other way. If the government does not help, the gravestones will continue to lie underfoot.

I would also conclude by saying that I agree wholeheartedly that the scientific study of Tatar gravestones and the collection of the full corpus is a desideratum for the study of the history of medieval and modern Tatar civilization. As I have tried to indicate above, there are important aspects in the history of the language, society, economy, and religion of the Tatar people for which gravestones are often a unique source. I would also go one step further, namely that there should be an online corpus of the inscriptions of all of the Turkic peoples so that one can compare and contrast the inscriptions of different Turkic peoples over Central Eurasia.

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